

The relationship-rich assignment

Facilitator guide for the two-sheet canvas

Redesign one assignment so that a student leaves your course knowing someone they did not know before.
Two A3 sheets, five zones, about forty minutes, and a syllabus close at hand.

What the canvas is for

Every assignment already directs a student's attention somewhere: to a search bar, a rubric, a deadline. A relationship-rich assignment directs it to a person, and is built so it cannot be finished without that conversation. The canvas takes one existing assignment through that redesign, with a peer review built in, and ends with a version ready for a syllabus and something of value that flows back to the partner.

TIME

About 40 minutes of work.
Allow 50 with
introductions.

MATERIALS

Both sheets printed at A3,
one set per person. Pencils,
sticky notes. Each person's
own syllabus.

FORMAT

Paired interview, solo draft,
paired review, solo final.
Works alone with the note
on page 2.

GOES WITH

The on-screen guide, which
shows one assignment
being redesigned.

Before you start

Ask everyone to bring a syllabus and choose one assignment before they sit down. Name the three kinds of partner a student might reach: someone new, whom the student would never otherwise meet; a lapsed connection, renewed; an existing bond, deepened by a question it has never been asked. Then say the two duties of care out loud, because they shape the whole design: partners consent to any recording and know where the work will go, and every student has a real choice of partner, with a backup path that costs nothing in the grade.

The five zones

	ZONE	WHO, HOW LONG	WHAT TO SAY
1	Audit your course for an opening	Paired, 4 min each	Interview each other in turn. Which course this fall? Which assignment has an opening for human connection? Why that one? Write the course, the assignment as it stands, and your reason. Capture the peer's clarifying questions, then circle the kind of connection and why it is the right kind.
2	Draft the redesign	Solo, 12 min	Five questions. Who will students reach? What will they do with them (choose the verb, then tailor the task)? What is AI's role (the mechanical load only)? What do students deliver? What goes back to the partner? Rough sentences beat blank lines.
3	Peer review and pre-mortem	Paired, 5 min each	Explain the assignment, then hand over the draft. The peer writes every place the design could fail. You write what you are removing, adding and changing because of it.
4	The final design	Solo, 6 min	The same five questions, written clean and in full sentences. This version reaches the syllabus. Every failure the peer found is answered somewhere in these five fields.
5	Reflection and commitment	Solo, 3 min	What changed in your thinking today, in one honest line. The term you will run it, the first step, and the first thing you will tell students.

Running it with a room

Call the zones and keep the clock. Zone 1 is an interview, not a conversation: one person asks and writes, then they swap. Zone 3 is where designs get better, so give it the full time and ask peers to be specific. "Some students are far from family" is useful. "This might be hard" is not. Between zones 3 and 4, remind the room that the final design should answer every failure the peer found. That instruction is what turns a sketch into an assignment.

The on-screen guide follows one assignment from a first-year course, Cornerstone II, How to Design Your Life. The Workview essay, written alone from two readings, becomes a recorded conversation with an elder whose working life the student has watched but never asked about. The peer review finds that some students are estranged or far from family and that some elders will refuse recording, so the final design removes the family requirement, adds an interview guide and a backup path through SFBU staff, and makes the reflection compare two workviews so a transcript alone cannot finish it. Use the sample to show what a pre-mortem finds and how a design absorbs it.

Running it alone

Zones 2, 4 and 5 work alone. For zone 1, write the interview questions and answer them in writing. For zone 3, send the draft to a colleague with one request: list every way this could fail for a student. A colleague who teaches a different population will find the failures you cannot see.

What a finished canvas looks like

Five fields in full sentences: who the student reaches and the backup if nobody answers; what they do together; what AI carries (transcription, translation, prompts, and nothing that is the point of the work); what the student delivers; and what the partner receives. The sample's partner receives a one-page portrait of their own workview, returned in person, with thanks. The grade lasts a semester. The portrait does not.

The two duties of care

Consent and choice. Partners agree to any recording and know where the work goes, including whether it will be shown to anyone else. Students choose their partner from a wide enough range that a student far from family, or from a small network, has a path that costs nothing in the grade. A design that quietly assumes an intact family or a professional network will leave someone out, and the pre-mortem exists to catch that before students do.

The rule that makes it work. Remove the relationship and the assignment should collapse. If a student could complete it without the conversation, the relationship was decoration, and the design needs another pass.

Related reading: the Relational Intelligence and Trauma-Aware Teaching pages on the CEPI site, and the Faculty Guidebook, section 8.